

## 5. Size of Utah's Homeless Population

Estimates of the number of homeless persons in the United States range from 350,000 to 3 million. Estimates vary because (1) there is no reliable, systematic, nationwide count of homeless persons; (2) there is high turnover in the homeless population; (3) it is logistically difficult to locate and count homeless persons; and (4) definitions of homelessness vary greatly.<sup>1</sup>

In a report to the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1984, several methods were used in an attempt to estimate the national homeless population.<sup>2</sup> By applying these same methods to earlier studies, 1990 census information, and our sixteen point prevalence counts, a general estimate of Utah's homeless population can be reached.

Two of the methods used by HUD in estimating the homeless population involved using ratios of the homeless to the general population. In the first method, a standard ratio of 25 homeless persons per 10,000 of the general population was used. Undoubtedly, using such a high ratio overestimates the problem. Even HUD admits that this is high and "likely to be an outside estimate." Nevertheless, it gives us an upper estimate of Utah's homeless population. Using the 1990 census data and the ratio of .0025, Utah's homeless would number 4,307.

The other method using census data takes a more moderate approach. On the assumption that larger metropolitan areas have greater concentrations of homeless than rural areas, this method assigns different ratios to different areas according to their population. For example a ratio of 13 homeless per 10,000 was assigned to those areas whose population was greater than one million persons. A ratio of 12 was assigned to areas whose population was 250,000 to one million and 6.5 was assigned to areas up to 250,000. By combining Salt Lake, Davis, Utah, and Weber counties into a single metropolitan area and multiplying it by the respective ratio (.0013), the resulting homeless count for the area would be 1,737. The remaining population of the state would then be multiplied by .00065, equaling an additional 464 homeless persons. By using this method, Utah's homeless population may be estimated at 2,201.

In a report to HUD, two other methods are used to estimate the homeless population. Both methods are based on ratios of the sheltered homeless to those who are not publicly sheltered. In three cities (Phoenix, Pittsburgh, and Boston) street counts of the homeless were made and then compared to the number of sheltered homeless. In both Boston and Pittsburgh, the ratio was very similar, 1.2 and 1.3 respectively. But in Phoenix the ratio of street homeless to sheltered homeless was 2.7 to 1. Burt also points out that by counting only those sheltered, the population will be under-counted.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"A Special Report, Assisting the Homeless", *Intergovernmental Perspective* 15 (Winter 1989) 32.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters* (May 1984), pp. 8-21.

<sup>3</sup>Burt, p. 28.

In the past, we have taken the average of the three ratios (1.77) and multiplied it by the numbers given in the point prevalence counts to get a reasonable estimate of the state's homeless on a given day. However *The 1995 Utah Homeless Survey* undertaken by the University of Utah surveyed 212 homeless individuals and determined that 66.5 percent were living in shelters and 33.5 percent were in other locations; we have used the ratio established by the University's survey to estimate the total number of homeless persons not in shelters on any given night.<sup>4</sup>

## HOMELESS IN UTAH ON A GIVEN NIGHT

<b>1986-1998</b>		
<u><i>Year</i></u>	<u><i>Sheltered Homeless</i></u>	<u><i>Estimated Total Homeless</i></u>
1986	465	534
1987	427	642
1988	513	771
1989	667	1033
1990	860	1293
1991	1036	1558
1992	1255	1888
1993	1368	2057
1994	1435	2160
1995	1325	1982
1996	1345	2024
1997	1236	1859
1998	1241	1869
1999	1322	1765

The others are located in camps, cars, transitional housing, hotels and motels, on the streets, with relatives, friends, and "other."

There are other ways to estimate the numbers of unsheltered homeless. Statistics compiled by Wasatch Homeless Health Care in 1993 show that the ratio of sheltered homeless versus unsheltered homeless on first encounters at their agency is 43.1 percent of males are unsheltered while 56.9 percent are living on the streets, and for females, 34.9 percent are in shelters and 65.1 percent are on the streets.<sup>5</sup> These numbers have a rough correlation to the results of the University of Utah's survey.

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<sup>4</sup>Mark C. Hampton, et al., *The 1995 Utah Homeless Survey Final Report* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup>See "Table 2. Selected Demographics and Other Information N = 4,325 Homeless Patients N = 9,928 Medical Encounters Seen From January 1, 1993 - November 30, 1993 Wasatch Homeless Health Care Program, SLC Utah, December 27, 1993."

The 1990 census, for the first time in history, made a "casual count" of the homeless. In this count, 925 persons were in shelters in Utah, representing .5 percent of the national total.<sup>6</sup> In addition, 276 were "visible" in street locations which represented 0.6 percent of the nation's total. The count itself is substantially below all estimates of the homeless population but has been adjusted by HUD and the Census Bureau to be more reflective of the homeless numbers. The data collected during the "casual count" was then compared to the sheltered homeless numbers and a ratio of 2.87 was made. Using this ratio and the point prevalence surveys, Utah's homeless could have been estimated at 3,942. This appears to be a relatively high estimate. However, the most stunning statistic about homelessness in Utah came in the tail-end of a story in the *Salt Lake Tribune* by Joan O'Brien headlined, "Poll Finds Active Mormons More Satisfied With Life Than Others." Under this unlikely headline was buried the following poll result: "About 5% of respondents said they were forced to live temporarily on the street, in a shelter or with others some time during the previous twelve months. If that finding is applied to Utah's total population of 1.7 million, nearly 85,000 were homeless at some time last year."<sup>7</sup> The extent of homelessness may never truly be known because of the woeful lack of resources and academic programs designed to study such politically unpalatable issues.

Burt predicted that "fewer people will be on the streets and more in shelters the colder the weather."<sup>8</sup> Therefore it was a surprise when the Utah count between 31 January 1991 and 31 July 1991 dropped by only 1.5 percent, hinting that the population was growing, not decreasing. This was confirmed when the 31 January 1992 count was taken—and the sheltered homeless population increased from 31 January 1991 by more than 29 percent.<sup>9</sup> The count from 31 July 1991 to 31 July 1992 increased by more than 27 percent but dropped between July 1992 and July 1993 by two percent. This probably reflected the cutbacks in services at Utah's main shelters run by Travelers Aid Society rather than a real drop in the numbers of homeless people. Between January 1993 and January 1994 we see a one percent decrease in the count, but between July 1993 and July 1994, we again witness about a 16 percent increase in the total counts for those months. Counts since 1994 show a gradual decrease in the numbers of homeless.

However Utah's shelters continue to have long waiting lists for shelter services in the summer, but in the winter people must be housed to avoid freezing. The organization in Salt Lake City on 29 October 1991 of the "Winter Overflow Emergency Shelter" (WOES) committee, which sheltered homeless people in the Salvation Army soup kitchen after-hours, was considered a temporary expedient. Now it is a given for handling the excessive numbers of people needing shelter in the cold winter months.<sup>10</sup> According to Pamela Atkinson, "during the winter of 1993 and 1994, an average of 200 individuals received

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<sup>6</sup>Since the census was taken on 20 March 1990 in a Rocky Mountain state, the overall estimate of sheltered homeless in 1990 would be expected to be higher than if the census was taken in, say, July; consequently our estimate is lower than that reported by the 1990 census (see Burt, pp. 26-27: "Different seasons can yield different estimates of the size of the homeless population, and may also yield different characteristics of the homeless.... Winter counts may yield the highest number in shelters in cold localities, while the opposite may be true in hot climates..."). For criticisms of the census bureau effort in Utah, see Lois M. Collins, "Did Census Undercount Utah Homeless?", *Deseret News*, 24 April 1991, p. A1-A2.

<sup>7</sup>Joan O'Brien, "Poll Finds Active Mormons More Satisfied With Life Than Others," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sunday, February 27, 1994, pp. B-1, B-2, column 4. I thank Steve Erickson for drawing this information to my attention.

<sup>8</sup>Burt, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup>Gregory A. Fredde, *Where is Home: Utah's Homeless Count 31 January 1992* (Salt Lake City: Community Development Division, 15 March 1992), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>See Lois M. Collins, "Daybreak Is Forcing Homeless Into Cold," *Deseret News*, 15 December 1993, which pictures the lobby of Travelers Aid Society full of people sleeping on the floors and sofas.

shelter here each night between early November and March 31, for a total of 30,468 shelter nights. We estimate it will take nearly \$88,000 to run the emergency shelter this winter, of which \$24,000 has not yet been realized. That will cover just the basics."<sup>11</sup> In the fall of 1994 the Overflow was moved to the old Weyer warehouse on Rio Grande Street just south of the St. Vincent de Paul Center.

The 180 bed facility was described by reporter Barbara Stinson Lee as "wall-to-wall army cots. Unpainted and patched with odd pieces of wood.... The warehouse offers none but the barest necessities—cots, donated blankets, and toilet facilities..."<sup>12</sup> The shelter is opened from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. through March 31, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides coffee, hot chocolate, and baked goods. By early December 1994 the facility was serving about two hundred people a night. The State Homeless Trust Fund, the LDS Foundation, Intermountain Health Care Foundation, and other corporate contributors initially funded the effort.<sup>13</sup>

The Overflow shelter moved to a site on 6<sup>th</sup> South between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> East for the winter of 1995-96, and after a contentious hearing found a near west-side address for the winter of 1996-97, but with neighbors vowing to close it down when the conditional use permits expire. Consequently in the winter of 1997-1998 Salt Lake City made a downtown building available, and in 1998-1999 the city of Midvale generously located an old warehouse and worked closely with Travelers Aid Society to locate an overflow shelter for the next three winters while permanent solutions are being worked on for a decentralized model relying heavily on transitional and permanent housing, as recommended by the Salt Lake County Council of Governments.

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<sup>11</sup>Barbara Stinson Lee, "Collaborative Effort Aims at Sheltering of Most Vulnerable," *Intermountain Catholic*, 18 November 1994; this is the best story about the effort and includes a photograph of directors of the major agencies responsible for the collaboration.

<sup>12</sup>Barbara Stinson Lee, "Collaborative Effort Aims at Sheltering of Most Vulnerable," *Intermountain Catholic*, 18 November 1994.

<sup>13</sup>Katherine Kapos, "Homeless Shelter's Overflow Runneth Over," *Salt Lake Tribune*, December 3, 1994; also see Lois M. Collins, "Warehouse Offers Winter Refuge to Homeless," *Deseret News*, November 12, 1994.

Because the existing homeless programs are already stretched to the limit, any increase in the homeless population is of great concern. As mentioned earlier, no attempt was made to count the homeless on the streets. However, beginning in the July 1992 count, homeless service providers were asked the number of persons on waiting lists and to estimate the number of homeless in the area; we recognize the limitations of using anecdotal information,<sup>14</sup> but felt even anecdotal clues would be better than no clues at all. We learn that:

<u>Date</u>	<u># on Waiting Lists</u>	<u>Estimated # in Immediate Area/Campers</u>
31 July 1992	259	330
31 July 1993	218	424
31 July 1994	193	400
31 July 1995	278	306
31 July 1996	202	335
31 July 1997	220	447
31 July 1998	121	256
31 July 1999	130	276

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<sup>14</sup>Burt, p. 10, says using expert opinion for counts is "a discredited approach," citing as a reference the General Accounting Office, *Homeless Mentally Ill: Problems and Options in Estimating Numbers and Trends* (Washington, D.C., USGAO, GAO/PEMD-88-24, 1988); Burt continues that "it has numerous problems, the most serious of which are: experts usually are familiar with only the small segment of town where they work, and have no clear way to generalize to a whole city; and experts may be 'interested parties,' whose jobs rely to some extent on the size of their estimate. When experts are capable of providing such disparate estimates as 2,000 to 20,000 for the same city at the same time, one must wonder about the value of their expertise." However, Burt adds that "shelter operators are quite good at providing relatively precise statistics on characteristics they can see" and "shelter operators and other service personnel may also provide reliable statistics about certain things, such as the difficulties that homeless children have getting enrolled in school, or the presence of alcohol abuse among the homeless adults they serve, if they are in a position to know and if they are asked at a general enough level and if they are given a 'cannot judge' option." Burt cites as an example of an appropriate question for expert opinion "**For alcohol abuse:** almost none, about 1/4, about 1/2, about 3/4, almost all."

Our use of expert opinion does, we think, fall within Burt's allowable approaches, seeking as it does to learn how many homeless people were actually on waiting lists or estimated to be in the immediate area--i.e., in the "segment of town where they [homeless providers] work." We have not asked for "expert opinion" to tell us the numbers of homeless persons in a given city, county, or in the state as a whole.